

Pea Island

National Wildlife Refuge

photo: USFWS



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1938.
- Acres: 5,834 (land), 25,700 acres (Proclamation Boundary Waters).
- Located on the north end of Hatteras Island, a coastal barrier island, and part of a chain of islands known as the Outer Banks.
- Approximately 13 miles long (north to south) and ranges from a quarter mile to 1 mile wide (from east to west).
- Location: 10 miles south of Nags Head, NC on NC 12.

Natural History:

- Area was historically used for market waterfowl hunting, commercial fishing, farming and livestock operations.
- Refuge is comprised of ocean beach, dunes, upland, fresh and brackish water ponds, salt flats and salt marsh.
- Bird list boasts more than 265 species; wildlife list has 25 species of mammals, 24 species of reptiles, and 5 species (low number due to salt environment) of amphibians.
- Concentrations of ducks, geese, swans, wading birds, shore birds, raptors and neo-tropical migrants are seasonally abundant on refuge.
- Refuge has 1,000 acres of manageable waterfowl impoundments.
- Several shorebird nesting areas and wading bird rookeries are located on the refuge.
- Endangered and threatened species include: peregrine falcons, American bald eagles, loggerhead sea turtles and piping plovers.

Financial Impacts

- Administratively under the “umbrella” of Alligator River NWR, which has a staff of 35 and an annual budget of \$1,112 (both figures include Pea Island NWR).
- Two paid employees actually report to Pea Island NWR on a daily basis.
- Numerous volunteers devote approximately 100,000 hours each year to the refuge.
- 2.1 million visitors annually.
- Pea Island NWR is known as a “Birder’s Paradise”; birders are among the most affluent eco-tourists. Other eco-tourists include canoeists and kayakers, beachcombers, surf and sound fisherman, and nature photographers.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide nesting, resting and wintering habitat for migratory birds, including the greater snow geese and other migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, raptors and neo-tropical migrants.
- Provide habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species.
- Provide opportunities for public enjoyment of wildlife and wildlands resources. Public use programs focus on interpretation, environmental education, wildlife observation, wildlife photography and fishing.

Management Tools

- Water level manipulation in three brackish/freshwater impoundments.
- Prescribed fire.
- Mechanical/chemical control of noxious plants.

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- Wildlife and habitat surveys (loggerhead sea turtles, waterfowl, shorebirds).
- Environmental/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Outreach.
- Partnerships.

Public Use Opportunities

- Half-mile, fully handicapped-accessible foot trail.
- Refuge Visitor Center with interpretive wildlife exhibits and sales area operated by the Refuge's non-profit support group, the Coastal Wildlife Refuge Society.
- Surf and sound fishing.
- Observation tower and platforms.
- Nature photography, including public photo-blind.
- Environmental education.
- Interpretive programs.

Calendar of Events

May: Migratory Bird Day.

June: Crabbing/Fishing Rodeo.

June-August: children's wildlife discovery programs, summer bird walks, guided canoe tours (fee program).

September-November: fall bird walks.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

November: Wings Over Water.

Questions and Answers:

Why do some rangers wear green uniforms and some wear brown?
The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) uniform is primarily brown. Pea Island is a small refuge that lies within Cape Hatteras National Seashore. While Pea Island is administered by FWS, Cape Hatteras National Seashore falls under National Park Service (NPS) administration. NPS uniforms are green and gray.

Both USFWS and NPS are Interior Department agencies; however, they have different primary purposes.

Stated simply, parks are for people; refuges are for wildlife. Both agencies manage wildlife; both offer many public use opportunities. The difference is in priorities. On refuges, wildlife are top priority. The refuge was established to provide habitat for wildlife and to provide compatible wildlife-dependent public use opportunities that don't conflict with providing that wildlife habitat.

When and where can we see a sea turtle?

Healthy sea turtles come ashore only to lay eggs and only during the summer months. Laying usually occurs at night, and the refuge is open to the public only during daylight hours. Pea Island beaches usually have fewer than 10 nests each year. Therefore, it is unlikely that visitors will see a healthy sea turtle on refuge beaches. Occasionally, dead or injured sea turtles wash ashore and can be found on the beach or in the surf.

Why is the refuge called Pea Island?

At one time, a majority of the greater snow goose population wintered on what is now Pea Island NWR. Historically, these birds foraged in the dunes and along the sound shore. In the dunes, they found a small plant whose tiny pink/lavender flowers matured to form beans that were packed with energy. These "dune peas" provided a predictable food source for the wintering geese: the refuge was literally the "pea island" for snow geese.

Why is there constant work on the highway and adjacent land through Pea Island (sand bags, moving sections, bulldozing, plantings, etc.)?

The ocean, with associated winds and tides, can be an overwhelming force with which to contend. Atlantic storms frequently cause dune blowouts, tidal surges and blowing sand. These make sections of the road impassable due to flooding and shifting of the dunes. NC Highway 12 is the only road connecting the seven villages that lie south of the refuge on Hatteras Island with their survival needs. Residents of these villages need access for supplies, employment, medical care, etc. The powerlines, associated with NC 12,

provide electricity that is also critically needed by these villages.

Will there ever be jetties at Oregon Inlet on the north end of the refuge?

The construction of jetties is just one proposed way to maintain a deep channel in this dynamic inlet. The Department of Interior Coastal biologists feel that jetties would do more harm than good. Serious concerns about the impacts of jetties range from rapid erosion of the refuge to impacts on fish nursery areas in Pamlico Sound. The issues are complicated and involve a great deal of speculation and data gathering. In short, solutions to the problems at Oregon Inlet and potential impacts of jetty construction are still being evaluated.

If erosion is such a problem, why don't you just build more dunes?

Scientific evidence does not support dune construction for the purpose of slowing erosion. Also, in North Carolina, there are a number of state and Federal agencies that monitor and regulate any "ground disturbing" development on the coast. Probably the two main players on the regulatory end are the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management.

Most "ground disturbing" activities on the refuge fall under the jurisdiction of one or both of these agencies. In addition, the refuge manager must justify uses, such as dune construction, mining of sand and beach nourishment, to ensure the use will be compatible with refuge purposes. In general, the role of the FWS is to provide comments and recommendations about what will impact wildlife and habitat.